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NEWSWEEK
21 April 1986

Targeting A 'Mad Dog'

With two U.S. aircraft carriers at the ready, Reagan weighs options for attacking Libya's Kaddafi

Day after day, Ronald Reagan kept building his case against Muammar Kaddafi—and hinting that the United States was ready to hit him again. This time the *casus belli* was the La Belle discothèque bombing in West Berlin. The president's counselors said they had worked up an "indisputable" trail of evidence connecting Libyan agents to the murderous blast. Two U.S. aircraft carriers took up positions within striking distance of Libya. Reagan suggested he was only waiting for clear battle conditions and a complete dossier on the Berlin case before striking. Turning up the rhetorical heat, he called Kaddafi "this mad dog of the Middle East." Going the boss one better, a senior U.S. official said, "We all know what you do with a mad dog."

With the USS Coral Sea and the USS America both in the Mediterranean, one plausible scenario was that Reagan would send Navy jets from the carriers to bomb airfields, missile batteries, radar towers or other military targets along the Libyan coast. In addition, NEWSWEEK has learned, Washington has quietly asked Egypt to allow the USS Enterprise, now stationed in the Indian Ocean, to pass through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. The president's advisers were confident they had the hardware to carry out a successful strike—and to best anything Kaddafi might throw back (page 22). United Nations Ambassador Vernon Walters also left on a trip to London, feeding speculation that Washington might try to launch a raid with U.S. Air Force FB-111 bombers based in Britain. The president's advisers were leaning against two other options: trying to take out Libya's oilfields or hitting suspected terrorist training camps. But there was still an outside chance they might go after some of those targets.

As the days dragged on, however, it became increasingly difficult to sort out the administration's real intentions from misguided leaks and deliberate disinformation. Reagan's advisers were still dickering about what to do. Some members of the team argued they had been too slow and too public about preparing their attack. They advised waiting until Kaddafi's next outrage, which they predicted could come any time. Washington had some good reasons for taking its time: it wanted to clinch the La Belle case, muster allied support and assemble maximum firepower. Making a virtue of necessity, some officials also argued that the delay wore down the Libyans and kept them off balance.

Still, the dawdling added to the risks in taking another poke at Libya. The unseemly dribble of leaked battle plans gave Kaddafi plenty of time to get ready. One danger was that the Libyans would down or capture American servicemen. "If I were a Navy pilot expecting to fly missions over Libya, I would be feeling very cross right now," said one Western diplomat in Washington. "First they leak my targets. Now they delay things to give Kaddafi good time to prepare."

Another peril was that Kaddafi might retaliate by launching terrorist attacks in the United States. But Americans are already at risk. NEWSWEEK has obtained a summary of intelligence reports prepared by U.S. officials that suggest that Kaddafi has stepped up surveillance of American citizens, businesses and government posts. According to the reports, U.S. embassies in Greece and nearby NATO countries—probably Italy and Turkey—are targets of Libyan plots, as are U.S. embassies in 10 African countries. Three Libyan agents entered an African country with plans to attack the U.S. chancery and kidnap the ambassador. One U.S. ambassador in the Middle East has been targeted for assassination. In a Latin American country, a car with Libyan diplomatic plates was caught tailing a school bus filled with American children. Western sources have also uncovered evidence that Kaddafi is offering to pay Iran and Islamic Holy War in Lebanon $100 million for the six Americans they are holding. And U.S. intelligence has learned that Kaddafi is plotting to attack U.S. "commercial interests"—primarily banks—in Europe and the Middle East.

Long struggle: In any event, Washington faced the risk of a protracted, escalating struggle, and some of Reagan's advisers worried that Americans may not have the stomach for that kind of fight. Over the long run, strategists believed that the European allies and the moderate Arabs would support a move to get tougher with Kaddafi—and that the Soviets didn't care enough about their mercurial ally to allow his fight with Washington to upset arms-control talks or planning for another summit. Even so, another round with the colonel—particularly if it got bloody—could fray U.S. relations with all of those parties.

Although the dangers were clear, the president's aides argued strongly that they had ample cause for taking a second crack at Kaddafi. After the Gulf of Sidra skirmishes, they had hoped to deter Libya's terrorist adventures by leaking what U.S. intelligence knew about them to the press (NEWSWEEK, April 7). But as one top U.S. official put it, Kaddafi's suspected role in the West Berlin bombing and several other attacks since then suggest that "he's decided to go ahead no matter what." Privately, the president and his senior aides conceded that their test of wills with Kaddafi might not end until Kaddafi was dead. They had no intention of trying to do the job themselves, but they hoped America's military pressure might encourage disgruntled Libyan officers to move against their leader. There were reports Reagan might decide against a strike if the allies agreed to tougher economic and political measures against Libya. Otherwise, his aides said, the president could still give the "go" order.

'Proportional response': The debate turned on the policy of "proportional reponse" that Reagan approved at a National Security Council meeting on March 14. The doctrine, which holds that the force of U.S. retaliation should match the strength of Kaddafi's attacks, was the brainchild of national-security adviser Vice Adm. John Poindexter (page 24), and it played a crucial role in persuading reluctant Defense Department officials to agree to challenge the Libyans in the Gulf of Sidra. This time, senior U.S. officials said, the Joint Chiefs of Staff laid out a full range of military options for Reagan and the National Security Council immediately after the Berlin bombing. Over the next three days new reconnaissance photos were reviewed and the list of targets was narrowed; then Reagan approved an attack "in principle."

Defense Department officials were ready to move quickly. At the Pentagon, NATO commander Gen. Bernard Rogers and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. William Crowe reviewed the firepower

needed to carry out a strike. Pentagon officials were determined to stick to the criterion of "proportionality"—and they read that as meaning an attack on limited targets such as the radar array around Tripoli. Then, according to Defense Department officials, the president and his other advisers decided to consider larger targets such as Libya's airfields. The military brass went back to the drawing board.

During most of the week the president had the guidance of advisers who were bullish on retaliation: Poindexter, Shultz and White House chief of staff Donald Regan. Two officials who favored greater restraint were out of town: Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger was in Asia and Australia, and Vice President George Bush was in the Persian Gulf. Over the weekend they both returned to Washington, and the president was expected to consult them before making a final decision. Through most of the deliberations Reagan kept his options open, according to a senior official. But he did insist on several preconditions for a strike: that Kaddafi's link to the Berlin bombing be firmly established; that any raid pose minimum risk to civilians, and that an attack entail an "acceptable ratio" of potential U.S. casualties.

Of all the options, the most likely to meet Reagan's guidelines was sending jets from the carriers to hit Libyan military positions. Most of those targets lie along the northern coast, reducing the exposure of Americans to hostile fire or capture. Administration officials were eager to ground the Libyan Air Force, which has bases at Umm Aitiqah, Okba ibn Nafa and Al Adem, either by destroying runways or attacking parked planes. If Kaddafi's ships sailed out to take on the Sixth Fleet, commanded by Vice Adm. Frank Kelso, there was the possibility of attacking naval bases at Benghazi and Tripoli. During the Gulf of Sidra confrontation, U.S. bombers took out a radar tower at a SAM-5 missile battery in Sirte. But the Libyans quickly rebuilt it, apparently with the help of Soviet advisers and free-lance British engineers. U.S. intelligence indicated they were also scrambling to complete a SAM-5 position in Benghazi. If the United States went after the missile sites again, administration sources said, it would hit the radar antennas, then follow up by destroying the launchers and any missiles stored nearby.

The administration had also not ruled out a longer range hit. From the start the Pentagon had liked the option of dispatching the British-based FB-111s, which can move fast, fly low and carry a heavy bomb-load. At first, according to British officials, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was cool toward the proposal. But the sources said she warmed up after U.S. officials let the British see their full file on Kaddafi's links to the La Belle blast. As Vernon Walters left for Europe, Thatcher was said still not to like the idea of using Britain as a staging area but to be willing to go along if Reagan insisted. In another sign the administration might be leaning toward the Britain scenario, several U.S. tanker aircraft, which could be used for in-flight refueling, took wing for American air bases in the United Kingdom.

The president's advisers rejected other possibilities as too dangerous. The CIA had identified some three dozen camps where it suspected the Libyans of training terrorists. But top U.S. officials argued that strikes on those targets might also hit civilians. Senior planners pointed out that an attack on Libyan oilfields, pumping stations and loading docks could endanger innocent oil workers, including Americans and Europeans. Senior officials said they gave only limited consideration to a joint ground operation with Egypt—a move that Arab diplomats in Washington advised could have disastrous consequences for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Intercepted messages: While it weighed its military choices, the administration also worked to tie Kaddafi to the Berlin bombing. Senior officials in Washington echoed reports that U.S. intelligence had intercepted messages between Tripoli and the Libyan People's Bureau in East Berlin. In late March, they said, Tripoli instructed the bureau to carry out an undisclosed "plan." On April 4 the bureau informed its capital that the operation would take place soon. Hours later—after the attack on the discothèque—the Libyans in East Berlin reported that they had executed the plan. Then on April 6 Tripoli exhorted other People's Bureaus to follow East Berlin's example. The Washington sources also seconded what NATO commander Rogers said after a speech in Atlanta: that U.S. commanders had gotten wind of an imminent attack and tried to alert nightspots favored by American servicemen—but that they were "15 minutes too late" to save La Belle.

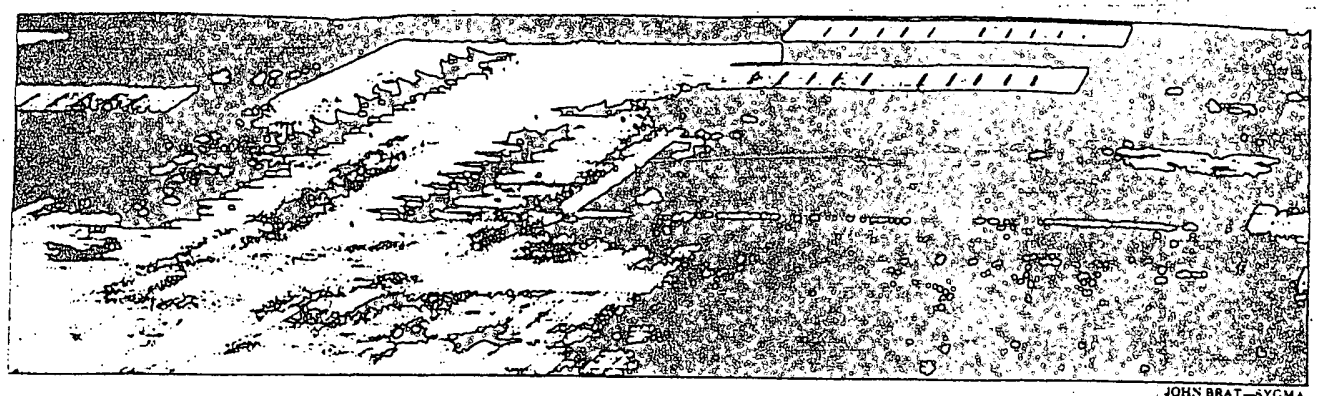
White House officials were eager to manage the evidence, however, both because they wanted to make sure it was accurate and because they wanted to wait for an official announcement until they were ready to take military action. As a result, they refused to back up two top-level officials who went public prematurely. One was Rogers, who went on the record after his address in Atlanta. The other was U.S. Ambassador to West Germany Richard Burt, who bragged about the administration's goods on the "Today" show. According to one Reagan aide, White House officials didn't dispute the information Burt mentioned, but they were "looking for more." They also charged Burt with being publicity hungry. "Some people can't avoid kissing a television camera when it's pointed at them," sniped one senior Reagan official.

When the president did lay out his case against Kaddafi, he was likely to cite more than the La Belle blast. Senior U.S. officials said they had intelligence about Libyan involvement in a rocket attack against the American Embassy in Beirut last week and in two other terrorist plots since the Gulf of Sidra showdown. They said one was a plan to assassinate U.S. Ambassador to France Joe Rodgers; however, both French and Western sources in Paris denied knowledge of such a plot. U.S. intelligence sources said Kaddafi recently instructed two Lebanese Army officers with close ties to Syria to "activate" a plan to kill American diplomats in Beirut. The sources also said a number of defecting Libyan agents—including some Libyans, but mostly Palestinians, North Africans and West Europeans—had provided details on Libyan plots against Americans. The sources said that this information was sometimes paid for with a few hundred dollars—and that some of it had been confirmed independently.

European doubts: In the campaign to rally allied support, the State Department sent cables on Kaddafi's links to terrorism to major West European capitals. But only the British were shown raw transcripts of the intercepted Libyan messages. The other allies saw paraphrases. That appeared to explain why the West Germans sounded circumspect about the evidence in the La Belle case, even though they verified the thrust of Washington's allegations. Responding to U.S. pressure, the French threw out two Libyan diplomats two weeks ago. Last week Bonn also expelled a couple of Libyan envoys. But the allies continued to resist U.S. requests to shut down the People's Bureaus or to impose tougher economic sanctions against Kaddafi. Since private U.S. firms still do a lot of business with Libya, they maintained that Washington's demands were hypocritical. In addition, they repeated their longstanding argument that sanctions don't work.

Many Europeans also worried that Reagan's war with Kaddafi had become counterproductive—and they were joined in that concern by many Arab diplomats and U.S. foreign-policy analysts. The skeptics argued that bloodying Kaddafi might only make him more of a hero to his people. "Kaddafi would have to hire every Madison Avenue PR firm to get what Reagan is providing him with," said one French official. They also stressed that even if Libya's troublemaking was stopped, terrorists would still get aid and comfort from the likes of Syria, Iran and the Soviet Union. "Terrorism has been around forever and it is going to be with us forever," pointed out Gary Sick, a former NSC officer under Jimmy Carter. As Reagan and Kaddafi moved closer to the next round in their grudge match, however, those calculations appeared almost moot. Both sides had raised the rhetorical stakes so high that they seemed compelled to act—and the fight was likely to get nastier before it was over

MARK WHITTAKER *with* JOHN WALCOTT, JOHN BARRY *and* THOMAS M. DEFRANK *in Washington and* [illegible]



JOHN BRAT—SYGMA

Outclassed and outnumbered: *Some of the colonel's MiG's at a Libyan air base outside Benghazi, east of the disputed Gulf of Sidra*

Hitting Back at Libya: How the U.S. Might Do It

Militarily, it's no contest. The world's most technologically formidable arsenal is squaring off against an Arab power with far more bluster than brawn. The biggest challenge is defeating Libya's air defenses—and inflicting enough damage to keep Kaddafi's forces from rebuilding as they have done before.

Blinding enemy air defenses is the first priority in a surgical strike. U.S. fighters, bombers and electronic-warfare planes streaking off the carrier decks would work much like a football offense with some players clearing a path for the player carrying the ball. Navy A-6E Intruders and A-7E Corsair bombers are the deadly ball carriers. Sophisticated F/A-18 Hornet and F-14A Tomcat fighters would take on any Libyan jets sent up to intercept the air armada. EA-6B Prowler aircraft would provide vital support by fooling enemy radar. Each Prowler carries five long pods under its wings to listen for enemy radar signals; on-board computers match them against a stored "library," pinpointing their source. Specialists on board distort the radar pulses, sending back false readings about the aircraft's altitude and course. A Libyan radar operator might think he saw many planes, or his screen might be snowed like a broken TV set.

Wire spaghetti: The standard attack plan is to run two U.S. strike groups toward the enemy radar at once. One group would consist only of EA-6B's, trying to look like as many aircraft as possible; the other would consist of attack planes, trying to look inconspicuous. To determine which was the attack force, Libyan operators would have to leave their radar transmitting—long enough, theoretically, for U.S. bombers to close in, launch their missiles and peel for home. Their HARM's (high-speed anti-radiation missiles) would zero in on the radar beams at speeds up to Mach 2, their 46-pound warheads shredding the transmitting grids into wire spaghetti. Also in HARM's way: radio towers near Tripoli that serve vital communication roles.

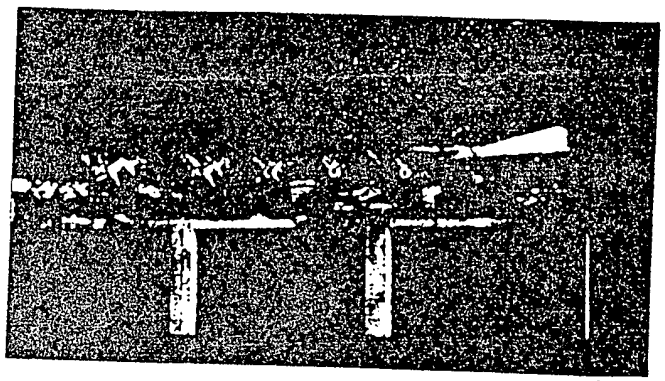
With its radar blinded, Libya's Soviet-made SAM anti-aircraft missiles would be virtually useless. Other U.S. attack planes could follow in and destroy the SAM's with Rockeye cluster bombs. The Rockeyes—each releasing 247 armor-piercing darts—could also make Swiss cheese out of any Libyan planes sitting on Kaddafi's airstrips. To destroy aircraft in hangars, the Navy has CBU-72 explosive bombs that spray 200 pounds of fuel in a fine aerosol, then ignite the cloud, creating a wave of pressure strong enough to collapse almost any structure.

More firepower: Fully destroying Libyan airfields or oil facilities would require more firepower than carrier-based aircraft provide. But Air Force B-52s flying from stateside bases or FB-111s from U.S. bases in Britain could pulverize either. Both could be refueled in midair by KC-135 tankers, hit their targets and return home without stopping. Kaddafi's new SAM-5s are designed to thwart such high-flying B-52s, so destruction of the missiles by low-flying carrier-based planes would be an essential prelude.

Kaddafi's defenses have other weaknesses. SAM radars are difficult to operate in hot climates; they overheat at midday and freeze at night. And they are only as good as their operators; Libya has few trained technicians. The lack of skilled pilots is also the Achilles' heel of Libya's Air Force, already outclassed by the Navy's Tomcats. Hornets and their high-tech air-to-air missiles. Facing those odds, six Syrian pilots on loan to Libya refused to take off in Kaddafi's Soviet-made MiG's during last month's Gulf of Sidra dustup, and Libya mounted little air challenge. Kaddafi's missile ships, meanwhile, would run up against the Navy's Harpoon antiship cruise missiles. Launched from A-6E Intruders or cruisers like the Yorktown, the huge sea-skimming Harpoons have built-in radar to home in on moving targets.

There are plenty of opportunities for problems. Two carrier-based planes were shot down over Lebanon in 1983, and Libyan air defenses are more formidable than those. Last month U.S. HARM missiles managed to knock out only one of seven radars at Libya's SAM-5 site near Sirte, and even one operating SAM-5 could do serious damage. But on paper at least, Kaddafi's forces are heavily outnumbered, which is exactly what U.S. strategists hope he knows.

MELINDA BECK *with* JOHN BARRY *in Washington*

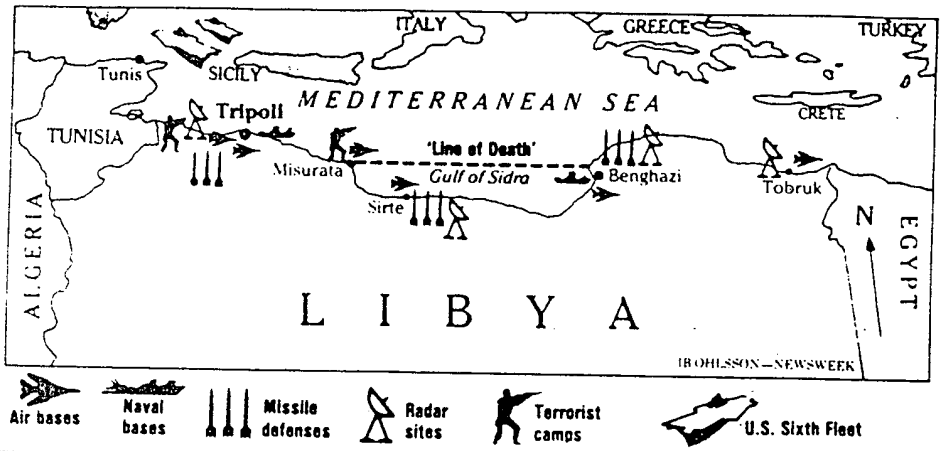


SYGMA

In HARM's way: *Soviet-built SAM-2 antiaircraft missiles*

Targets of Opportunity

Reagan could hit air and naval bases, radar stations or terrorist camps



ON PAGE 20

TIME
21 April 1986

COVER STORY

Targeting Gaddafi

Reagan readies revenge on a "mad dog"

By Sunday morning they were back on station in the central Mediterranean north of Libya: the carriers *America* and *Coral Sea*, 14 escort warships and two other support vessels. Once again, as in the clashes around the Gulf of Sidra three weeks ago, the flattops were prepared to launch their 160 fighters and bombers against targets in the desert country of Dictator Muammar Gaddafi. But this time there was no pretext that the exercise was to assert the right of free passage in international waters.

Nor was there the expectation that any American attack would depend on whether Libya fired first. Libya had already fired—choosing once again the weapon of a terrorist bomb. After countless unheeded warnings and after futile attempts to counter terrorism with economic and political sanctions, the U.S. Sixth Fleet was poised to strike the type of blow the Reagan Administration had threatened—and anguished about—for so long.

The world watched something it had never seen before: the U.S. Navy moving into position so that the Commander in Chief could have the option of militarily punishing another nation for its sponsorship of international terrorism. As West European allies fretted about the potential consequences, and as Senate and House leaders gave qualified support while waiting to be consulted under the War Powers Resolution, the pilots of the F/A-18 Hornets and A-7E Corsairs stood ready for the command, should it come, to attack and destroy Libya's airfields, radar stations, Soviet-built missile sites and terrorist training camps.

No matter what the outcome, regardless of when and if the President issues a final order, the week's drum rolling dramatized Ronald Reagan's world view in action. It also illustrated some of the frustrations of putting that view into action. Leaks about the details of the proposed operation prompted pressure from the National Security Council to postpone action. In addition, Admiral William Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was concerned that more firepower was necessary, and the CIA needed to extract key Libyan agents from the country. But the more vexing problems were the political ones. Reagan and his advisers found themselves caught between their immediate temptation to strike Libya as they had warned they would and a growing awareness of the costs and risks of such a venture.

All week these uncertainties stoked tensions toward a fever point. It began with American officials pointing a menacing finger of suspicion at Libya as instigator of the bombing of a West Berlin disco that left an American serviceman and a Turkish woman dead. Then the Pentagon cryptically noted that the Sixth Fleet, which had scattered after the Gulf of Sidra battle, was steaming back toward Libya. Almost simultaneously, President Reagan at his Wednesday-night news conference called Gaddafi "this mad dog of the Middle East" and proclaimed that the U.S. would "respond" whenever the perpetrator of a specific terrorist act could be identified. Why had the U.S. once again targeted Gaddafi? Of all the evils and perils in the world, there is none that galls Reagan more than terrorism. Of all the anti-American thugs who hang out in the back alleys of the Third World, there is none Reagan despises more than Gaddafi. Last week those two hates came together, prompting Reagan to put the Libyan in the sights of the Sixth Fleet.

The erratic Libyan leader may not be the world's most effective governmental inciter of terrorist murder. Iran or Syria or both seem to be the prime instigators of a long string of outrages, notably the bombings that killed some 250 Americans in Lebanon in 1983 and '84. But Gaddafi has been the most open supplier of money, weapons, training and refuge to terrorist groups around the world. He has broadcast the most inflammatory public appeals for attacks on Americans. He has issued the most insolent taunts and threats of blood and death. And he happens to be the weakest militarily and the most isolated politically of the world's suspected terrorist leaders, despised even by many of his fellow Arab leaders and regarded nervously even by his Soviet supporters.

According to the most recent electronic eavesdropping by the U.S., Gaddafi has been planning even more terror attacks. He has ordered Libyan agents and their Palestinian supporters to "cause maximum casualties to U.S. citizens and other Western people." One top-ranking intelligence official told TIME last week. "That message, which was sent from Tripoli and uses Gaddafi's authority, outlines operational plans for more than ten terror attacks." The official also claimed that there is "solid" evidence that Gaddafi is trying to "buy" the six American hostages still being held by Hizballah (Party of God) terrorists in Lebanon. Purportedly, Gaddafi is willing to pay $100 million for custody of these hostages, and $50 million for the seven Frenchmen also being held.

Gaddafi has long seemed the obvious target if the Reagan Administration is to come around to the view long advocated by Secretary of State George Shultz: that the U.S. sometime, somehow, must begin to retaliate against terrorist attacks. "We have got to blow the whistle on it," Shultz says. "Whether it is his involvement in terrorism, whether it is freedom of navigation, [Gaddafi] is on the wrong side of the issues. If you let people get away with murder, you'll get murder."

The Administration has tried economic sanctions and appeals to allies to isolate Libya diplomatically; neither had much effect. On seven occasions, by Reagan's count, U.S. warships have maneuvered in or near the Gulf of Sidra, which Libya, in defiance of international law, claims as territorial waters. Twice Gaddafi has accepted the implicit dare to start a fight, and twice Libya has suffered: in 1981 U.S. forces shot down two Libyan jets, and three weeks ago they sank at least two Libyan patrol boats and bombed and briefly put out of action the radar at a Soviet-built missile base onshore. A Libyan armed forces official said last week that 56 Libyans had died in that fighting; there were no known U.S. casualties. The U.S. has discussed with Libya's feuding neighbor Egypt plans for coordinated American bombing strikes and an Egyptian ground invasion of Libya if Gaddafi should offer sufficient provocation. Cairo said no, in the well-founded belief that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak would practically guarantee his assassination by a Libyan hit squad if he went along with such a plan.

But one thing has always held the U.S. back from striking hard on its own in retaliation against Gaddafi's terrorism. The Administration felt that it could justify such an attack to the American people—and allies around the world—only if it had hard evidence to prove Libya responsible for a specific terrorist act. And such evidence was always lacking—until the early hours of Saturday morning, April 5. Then a bomb went off in La Belle disco in West Berlin, which was packed with off-duty American soldiers spending some of the pay they had collected earlier that night. U.S. Army Sergeant Kenneth Ford, 21, and a 28-year-old Turkish woman were killed; 230 people, 79 of them Americans, were injured.

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Shortly after the blast, and with increasing vehemence as the week continued, U.S. officials claimed that this time they had Gaddafi dead to rights. In a Wednesday speech in Atlanta, for example, General Bernard Rogers, supreme NATO commander in Europe, said the U.S. had "indisputable evidence" that the bombing was the work of a Libyan terrorist network. Though no one would disclose it publicly, the evidence is known to consist largely of intercepted messages from the Libyan capital, Tripoli, to the "people's bureau" (as Libya calls its diplomatic missions) in East Berlin, which is believed to have dispatched a terrorist to bomb the disco. One message, sent a few hours after the blast, guardedly congratulated the East Berlin bureau for a job well done *(see box)*.

At first some West German officials, like other U.S. allies, believed the evidence to be indicative rather than conclusive. By week's end Chancellor Helmut Kohl declared at a press conference that "the attack also had a Libyan background." But he took care to add, "Please note that I said 'also,' and not 'only.'" German intelligence officials explained that they had been shown what seemed to be only partial transcripts of the Libyan messages intercepted by the U.S. Those summaries, they said, certainly pointed to some Libyan involvement but did not quite prove that Gaddafi had planned and ordered the attack.

Other Europeans, while not putting anything past Gaddafi, were waiting to see the U.S. evidence, with one standout exception. In remarks known to reflect the views of his government, Sir Oliver Wright, British Ambassador to the U.S., told a South Carolina audience that there is indeed "uncontrovertible evidence that the Libyans have been the instigators of the most recent terrorist incidents."

In Washington there was never any real doubt. The question, rather, was whether the Administration was ready to take the risks of ordering a hard, unilateral strike. Those risks are both obvious and grave. Some U.S. pilots and other service members might be killed carrying out bombing runs of the scale being contemplated. Even severe military damage might not cow Gaddafi into calling off or slowing down terrorist attacks. On the contrary, he might intensify them, as he seems to have done after the Gulf of Sidra battle. Might Gaddafi carry out terrorist attacks inside the U.S., as he has often threatened to do? "We certainly do not overlook that possibility," said a grim-faced Ronald Reagan during his news conference.

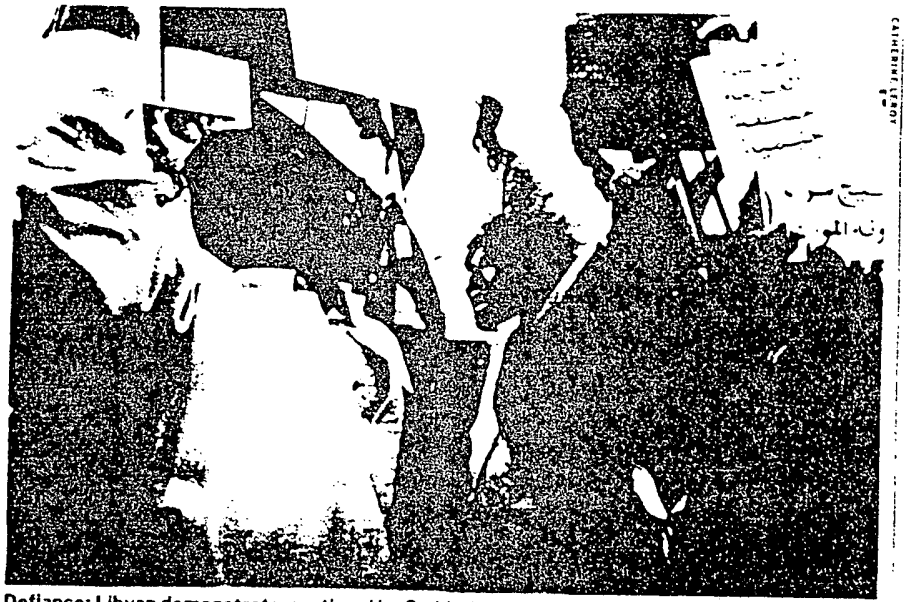
Even a clash with Gaddafi's Soviet allies, though it seems highly unlikely, cannot be ruled out. Soviet technicians prudently managed to be elsewhere when American missiles hit antiaircraft radars three weeks ago, but there is a possibility that some might be killed in a new strike. The Soviets, however, appeared to be as perplexed as everyone else about what might happen and what, if anything, they ought to do. "There have been no guarantees concerning action or nonaction on the part of the Soviet Union," said Valery Sukhin, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, at week's end. Georgi Arbatov, a top Kremlin adviser on American affairs, growled on U.S. television that Moscow had no deal to defend Gaddafi against the U.S. and added that the Libyan leader does not always tell the truth.

Asked point-blank at his Wednesday press conference to confirm or deny reports that he had already decided on a military response, Reagan grew visibly uncomfortable and replied, "This is a question that, as I say, is like talking about battle plans or something. It's not a question that I feel I could answer." In fact, the President that morning had approved a tentative decision to launch an attack. The decision was made by the National Security Council, meeting in the Oval Office (minus Vice President George Bush and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who were both traveling).

The NSC studied the evidence concerning the disco bombing and the intercepted messages indicating that Gaddafi was ordering a new wave of terrorist attacks. Admiral Crowe voiced his concerns about firepower, and CIA Director William Casey about getting agents out of Libya. But they and everyone else present agreed with Shultz, who said, "We have taken enough punishment and bearing. We have to act." For the sake of tactical surprise, it was agreed that the assault should be launched by carrier planes as soon as the flattops could get into position. Reagan directed that all precautions be taken to minimize casualties to Libyan civilians. Nonetheless, he told the council that it had his authority to proceed—"but let me know the plan you decide upon before you launch the attack."

After the President's news conference, a news blackout came down. White House Spokesman Larry Speakes opened a press briefing the next morning by announcing that he would answer no questions about Gaddafi or Libya. With or without any real information, however, enough people were speculating about the details of the operation to cause the Administration to feel that it was becoming impossible to maintain tactical surprise. It also became extremely difficult to keep open the option of making no major response to the most recent terror attack. "There's no question we created a bit of a Frankenstein's monster," said an NSC official on Friday. "In a way, I guess, we meant to do that. But the monster was supposed to spook Gaddafi."

Doubts and worries grew, and by Friday, says a top intelligence official, "we knew that we were doomed. Too many people were talking freely about the operation and too many operational details were already out. We had to postpone." About noon on Friday NSC hastily convened again in the Oval Office and got the President's agreement for a postponement of indefinite duration. Reagan, says one participant, "was furious. He realized that the operation had to be put off but



Defiance: Libyan demonstrators, stirred by Gaddafi, protest U.S. actions at a Tripoli rally

The strongman fires up his supporters with threats of blood and death to Americans.

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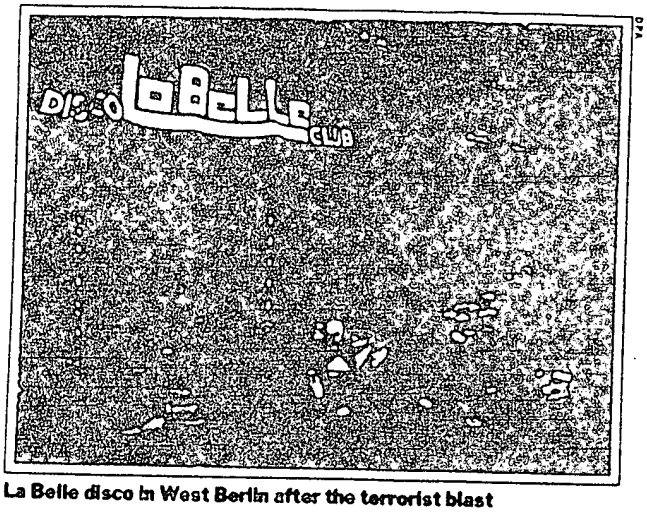
wanted to make sure that in the future no more leaks will get around."

A full-fledged reconsideration of options—whether to reschedule an attack, and if so what kind and when—looked unlikely until Sunday at the earliest. By then, Bush and Weinberger would be available. Bush was on a ten-day trip to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf nations, and arrived back Saturday night. Weinberger had been touring the Philippines and Pacific region; he arrived in Hawaii on Friday night and left for Washington Saturday.

As Bush and Weinberger were flying home, General Vernon Walters, the veteran troubleshooter and current U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., was beginning a swing through at least four West European capitals. "Basically, we want to tell allies where we are and what could happen," said one American official. Walters' first stop was on Saturday in London, where he met with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi announced that he would receive a presidential envoy on Monday.

Western Europe's predominant response to the threat of an American strike against Libya has been skittishness, again with the exception of Britain. While hardly eager to see a military clash, London made clear that it would approve an American blow that could be represented as a form of self-defense, and officials said retaliation for the disco bombing would qualify. Italy would be closest to any new U.S.-Libyan fighting; during the Gulf of Sidra battle it sent interceptor planes aloft, just to be ready in case some of Gaddafi's aging Soviet-built Tupolev bombers should try to attack NATO bases in Sicily. The Italians seemed to be bracing for a rerun of that experience: Prime Minister Craxi declared publicly last week that the problems of the Mediterranean "certainly cannot be settled by a military blitz," but Americans say the Italians have made no attempt in private to talk the U.S. out of a retaliatory strike.

Kohl, on the other hand, declared that "my advice would always be to avoid such acts of military reprisal until you know what you are starting and how you



La Belle disco in West Berlin after the terrorist blast

Seeking the Smoking Fuse

Uncle Sam is always listening. With high-tech spy satellites, ships jammed with electronic gadgetry, supersophisticated listening posts around the globe and eavesdropping devices—and sometimes with the help of plain old-fashioned human spies—the U.S. constantly monitors many of the key telephone conversations and cable traffic of its friends and foes alike. The U.S. intelligence community does not want to reveal which of these methods it used to listen in as Colonel Gaddafi sent orders from Tripoli to his far-flung terror network. But U.S. officials insist there is little doubt that a fortnight ago the U.S. intercepted communications that specifically link Gaddafi with the bombing of a West German disco that claimed the life of a U.S. serviceman and injured 230 people, including dozens of off-duty American soldiers.

Indeed, it appears that the U.S. almost learned about the bombing plot in time to warn American soldiers to stay out of Berlin's nightspots before the terrorists struck. Military police were already moving to alert G.I.s in the streets of Berlin when the bomb decimated La Belle disco. "We were about 15 minutes too late," NATO Commander General Bernard Rogers told a school audience in Atlanta last week. According to high-ranking intelligence officials, the U.S. intercepted a message from Gaddafi's headquarters to his henchmen in the Libyan "people's bureau" in East Berlin informing them that terrorists, probably Palestinian, would strike at locations in West Berlin where Americans are known to congregate. U.S. intelligence also reportedly picked up a communication from Tripoli offering "congratulations" after the blast. Asserted a top National Security Council official last week: "We have Gaddafi up to his ears in this bombing operation."

The U.S., of course, needs to be able to prove Gaddafi's complicity in order to justify reprisals, particularly military measures. The lack of "hard evidence" is constantly cited as a pretext by uneasy allies seeking to sidestep firm measures against the supporters of terrorism. Not everyone was satisfied with what Washington felt it could safely reveal. West German intelligence officials, who were provided with abbreviated and heavily edited summaries of the intercepted transmissions, accepted that there was some Libyan complicity in the Berlin bombing but were unwilling to hang all the blame on Gaddafi.

American intelligence officials faced a familiar dilemma: by disclosing too much they risked compromising their secret sources and methods of gathering intelligence. In fact, by revealing that they had broken the Libyan diplomatic code, they inevitably caused the Libyans to change it and become more careful about using the telephone. "The leaks have caused us a setback," conceded one National Security Agency official last week. "It will now take us more time to break the new codes, and in the meantime, we will be kept in the dark."

U.S. officials are somewhat doubtful of finding a Gaddafi link to the bombing of a TWA jet two weeks ago that cost four lives. The evidence so far remains sketchy, though intelligence experts were at least familiar with the type of bomb used to blow a hole in the airliner's fuselage. The timing device of the highly sophisticated bomb is activated by pressure—in this case, when a passenger sat on the seat under which it was placed. A similar bomb had exploded aboard a Pan Am flight from Tokyo to Honolulu in 1982. According to intelligence reports, only one terrorist is known to have the expertise to make this kind of bomb: a man who goes by the code name Rashid. Already a legend in the international terror network for his talents, Rashid was believed to be working for a terrorist group called the May 15 or Abu Ibrahim organization. The May 15 group works for the Syrian intelligence service, not Gaddafi, say U.S. officials. Indeed, a prime suspect in the case, May Elias Mansur, who is believed to have planted the bomb's detonator under the seat before getting off the flight during a stopover in Athens, has been linked to Syrian terrorist groups. But why would the Syrians get involved in this particular terrorist operation? One NSC official admitted that the U.S. is "still fishing" for clues—and still hoping that they will ultimately lead to Gaddafi's doorstep.

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are going to get out of it at the end." Other Germans elaborated by voicing a worry that is widespread in Europe: U.S. retaliation will prompt more terrorist attacks that will occur primarily in Europe; even if the principal targets are American, Europeans will get killed too. Says one West German government official: "The more the Americans hit Libya, the more the Libyans will hit back at U.S. targets in West Germany. We are more than a little bit afraid that we are going to be directly involved in the middle of their war."

France and West Germany each booted out two Libyan diplomats, though not, they insisted, in response to U.S. pressure. Spain, angered by a Gaddafi threat to mount terrorist attacks in all countries that harbor U.S. bases, recalled its Ambassador from Tripoli "for consultations."

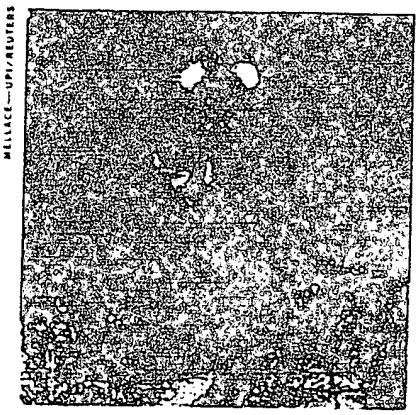
There were signs that the prospect of a U.S. military attack, combined with Gaddafi's vengeful bluster, was galvanizing European allies into talking about taking further steps. At a press conference in Tripoli, Gaddafi vowed to answer any U.S. strike by fomenting terrorist attacks in all the cities of southern Europe. An alarmed Italian Prime Minister Craxi phoned his Spanish counterpart, Felipe González, to suggest that a meeting of foreign ministers of the twelve European Community nations be held right away. The meeting was scheduled first for Wednesday, then for Monday. Its apparent purpose: to draft some European-wide program of economic and political sanctions that might hold enough promise of hurting Gaddafi to persuade the U.S. to call off a military blow.

Contingency planning by the Pentagon and CIA has by now given Reagan and his commanders a wide range of options to choose from, and targets to select, if they again decide to strike. Israeli officials late last week claimed that State Department Under Secretary Michael Armacost had told them the U.S. has identified more than 30 potential Libyan targets, ranging from airfields to oil depots; Washington reports add such intriguing items as Gaddafi's personal living quarters. Under one scenario, attack planes launched from the Sixth Fleet carriers could be joined by F-111s from Britain (the British reportedly have given their consent) and even by B-52 bombers flying from bases in the U.S.

Some plans have been drawn in impressive detail. One involves three waves of carrier-based planes that would strike in quick succession under cover of predawn darkness. First, fighter planes would launch missiles that home in on radar to knock out once again the radars at the SA-5 missile sites at Surt and Benghazi. Then, attack planes would wing in low and fast to knock out the missiles and their launchers. Once they had been destroyed, the third wave would hit adjacent airfields, destroying the runways so that Gaddafi's 550 combat aircraft could not scramble to counterattack the fleet. Supposedly, all that would take little more than an hour, at the end of which Libya would be crippled militarily at the price of a handful of U.S. casualties.

TERRY ASHE

General Bernard Rogers said last week that the U.S. had "indisputable evidence" that Libya was behind the Berlin disco bombing. As Commander in Chief of U.S. European forces, Rogers has the responsibility of the Sixth Fleet.



WALLACE—UPI/REUTERS

Vice Admiral Frank Kelso, commander of the Sixth Fleet, led his carrier groups back into the central Mediterranean. After directing the fighting in the Gulf of Sidra last month, Kelso praised the performance of his men as "first rate."

Another likely group of targets consists of communications facilities: radio-TV stations, ground-to-satellite stations and dishes, main telephone terminals. Knocking them out would, in theory, virtually cut Libya off from the outside world, at least for a time. Other potential targets offer both rewards and drawbacks. Hitting two training camps for terrorists that are known to operate near Tripoli and Benghazi would most closely fit the punishment for terrorism to the crime of inciting and supporting it. But the camps are thought to be empty right now, and when occupied they are also heavily used to train young recruits for the Libyan army, who bear no responsibility for Gaddafi's terrorism. Bombing oil jetties and other installations could cripple Libya's economy, but at the possible price of killing German, Italian and other foreign technicians still working in the Libyan petroleum industry—and possibly even some Americans. There were 1,500 in Libya in January, and some may have disobeyed Reagan's order to get out of the country. The Libyan intelligence-service headquarters, from which Gaddafi and aides launch terrorist operations, is in downtown Tripoli and hard to hit without causing heavy casualties among Libyan civilians.

But what would an attack on any or all of these targets actually do to combat terrorism? That is the essential question. If the Reagan Administration does hit Libya, the most it can count on is silent and grudging acquiescence from most of its allies and more vocal but still guarded approval from Congress—and that assumes the fighting is over quickly with no heavy loss of American lives. Heartier approval would follow only if the attack seemed likely to bring about a sizable decline in terrorist outrages.

If the Sixth Fleet eventually steams away without attacking, the Administration might win both applause for restraint and derision for making empty threats. But it would only be putting off until the next time the question of whether and how to retaliate. Given the virus of terrorism, there assuredly would be a next time. Indeed, having talked so much about retaliation and now gone so far toward it, Washington has practically guaranteed a sharpening debate about reprisal every time there is a new murderous attack for which intelligence officials believe they can pinpoint the perpetrator.

In part, the urge to hit back is driven by the new assertiveness of Reagan's foreign policy. The Administration takes pride in having put muscle into American policy; a series of successes from Grenada to the Philippines has shown that the U.S. can pull off military and diplomatic coups without risking nuclear holocaust. The spread of terrorism is the great, galling exception to this assertiveness; the U.S. too often has seemed impotent in preventing or avenging the deaths of its citizens. The Administration is eager to prove that the military power it has built at enormous expense has uses in the real world beyond standing off the Soviets.

But the case for retaliation goes far beyond a desire to flex muscle in a good cause. Terrorism has become a virtual war that pits mindless barbarism against all civilized society. Even more frightening than the number of terror attacks is a shift in their pattern away from military and political targets toward random violence against ordinary people—tourists, shoppers, service members dancing in a disco. This phenomenon has many complex causes. But Shultz and his supporters are convinced that a powerful factor is a

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belief among terrorists that they can act with impunity: the U.S. will huff and puff but never really do anything. That idea will not change, in this view, until the U.S. demonstrates that terrorists and the governments that sponsor them are not safe, that attacks on Americans are certain to carry a heavy price.

No one pretends, however, that military reprisal alone will stop terrorism. There is no Terrorist Central that can be bombed out of operation. Attacking Libya would do little to curb the depredations of terrorists sponsored by Syria or Iran or South Yemen, not to mention the innumerable and shifting groups that operate beyond the control of any government.

Would it quiet Gaddafi? Europeans fear it would do just the opposite. They are concerned that an American attack would force even conservative Arab leaders who hate and fear the Libyan dictator to take his side publicly. They are more worried about inflaming the anti-American passions of Middle Eastern youths already inclined toward extremism. Says one top Italian official: "The terrorists themselves are usually not Libyans. They are Beirutis, Lebanese of all kinds, Syrians, Iranians, Palestinians. Striking at Gaddafi militarily may just serve to recruit more such people."

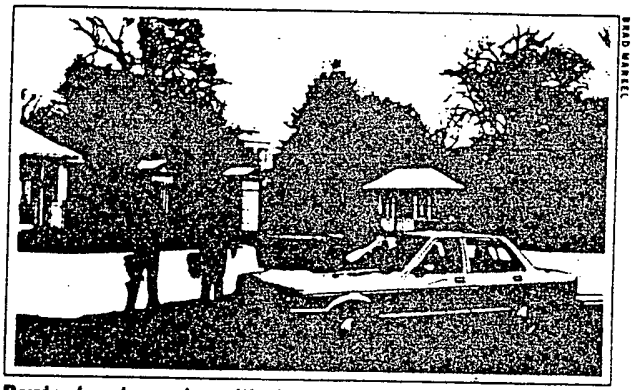
What many Europeans fear most is a deadly, escalating cycle of vengeance: terrorism begetting U.S. strikes, which prompt more terrorism in reply, which touches off more reprisals. In their view, and in the view of many American experts, an antiterrorism policy must be accompanied by concerted diplomatic efforts to bring about some resolution of Arab-Israeli conflicts, the Palestinian question and other root causes of tension in the Middle East. So far the Reagan Administration has done little, if anything, to reinvigorate the stalled peace process.

Nor can the cycle of terrorism be broken without more effective police work: better intelligence on extremist groups, intense surveillance of their movements, infiltration of terrorist cells. Such methods take a frustratingly long time to take effect, and meanwhile, murderous attacks continue. But the methods eventually do work; witness Italy's successes against the Red Brigades and West Germany's against the once dreaded Baader-Meinhof gang. Indeed, the President declared at his news conference last week that "in the last year . . . through our intelligence gathering in cooperation with our allies, we have aborted 126 planned terrorist attacks that never took place."

Nevertheless, last week's activities made it clear that the Reagan Administration, led by Shultz and others, firmly believes military reprisals must play a greater role in the undeclared war against terrorism. That is why Muammar Gaddafi once again finds himself in the cross hairs of America's Sixth Fleet. Uncle Sam spoke loudly, vowing vengeance, then raised his big stick. Given the dangers posed by terrorism, such a response was understandable, even justified. Then, at least for a moment, came an eerie pantomime of waiting and hesitation. Given the risks involved, the fact that the sword of vengeance cannot always be swift was also understandable, also justified. *—By George J. Church. Reported by Michael Duffy, David Halevy and Strobe Talbott/Washington*

Could It Happen Here?

In Berlin, a shattered discothèque; in Rome and Vienna, airline terminals strewn with bodies. So far, the U.S. has been spared the horror of a major terrorist attack. But as hostility intensifies between the U.S. and Libya, the shadow war could come closer to home. Security experts warn that extremists could find easy pickings in American cities. "We are absolutely unprepared here in the U.S.," says Dr. Robert Kupperman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies and a former National Security Council staffer. "Everywhere in the country, government facilities, commercial installations and civilian networks make ideal targets for terror attacks." A U.S. intelligence analyst concurs: "We have become the ultimate challenge for every terrorist, and we are just not ready."



Barricades, dressed up with plants, outside the White House

In Washington, security has been beefed up at the White House, where antiterrorist barricades have been installed to block cars and trucks. At the Pentagon, an underground concourse of shops and banks will soon be closed to anyone without special clearance. The State Department had also set up concrete barricades and sometimes screened visitors with metal detectors, but guards could not prevent a horrifying incident last summer when a 20-year-old man shot his mother to death, then took his own life just 100 yards from Secretary of State George Shultz's office. Since then Foggy Bottom has required more thorough personal searches, even for people carrying State Department passes.

In another likely target city, New York, the FBI and local police have established joint contingency plans to deal with terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, says an FBI official, "a determined nut can do great damage before you can neutralize him." For example, four men and two women said to be members of a terrorist group known as the United Freedom Front were able to set off ten bombs in military-reserve centers and corporate facilities in the New York City area before they were apprehended. The group was finally convicted of multiple conspiracy and bombing charges in federal court last month.

Authorities agree that the only way to prevent terrorist attacks is through timely intelligence. President Reagan has maintained that 126 terrorist missions were foiled in 1985. Federal officials said 23 of those were in the U.S., including plots to kill Libyan dissidents and efforts by Sikh extremists to assassinate Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during a visit last year.

The U.S. carefully keeps track of visitors and residents from hostile nations such as Libya, Iran and Syria. There are approximately 3,200 Libyans in the U.S. who have been granted temporary visas, including an estimated 1,200 students. The Government also maintains huge computer databases with information on individuals suspected of having radical, anti-U.S. associations. Meanwhile, the supersecret National Security Agency uses the world's most technologically advanced surveillance techniques to eavesdrop on questionable telephone calls and radio communications abroad and intercept and decode suspicious telex messages. To conform to U.S. privacy laws, the intercepts take place outside U.S. borders. But as the rest of the world painfully knows, determined terrorists are very hard to stop.

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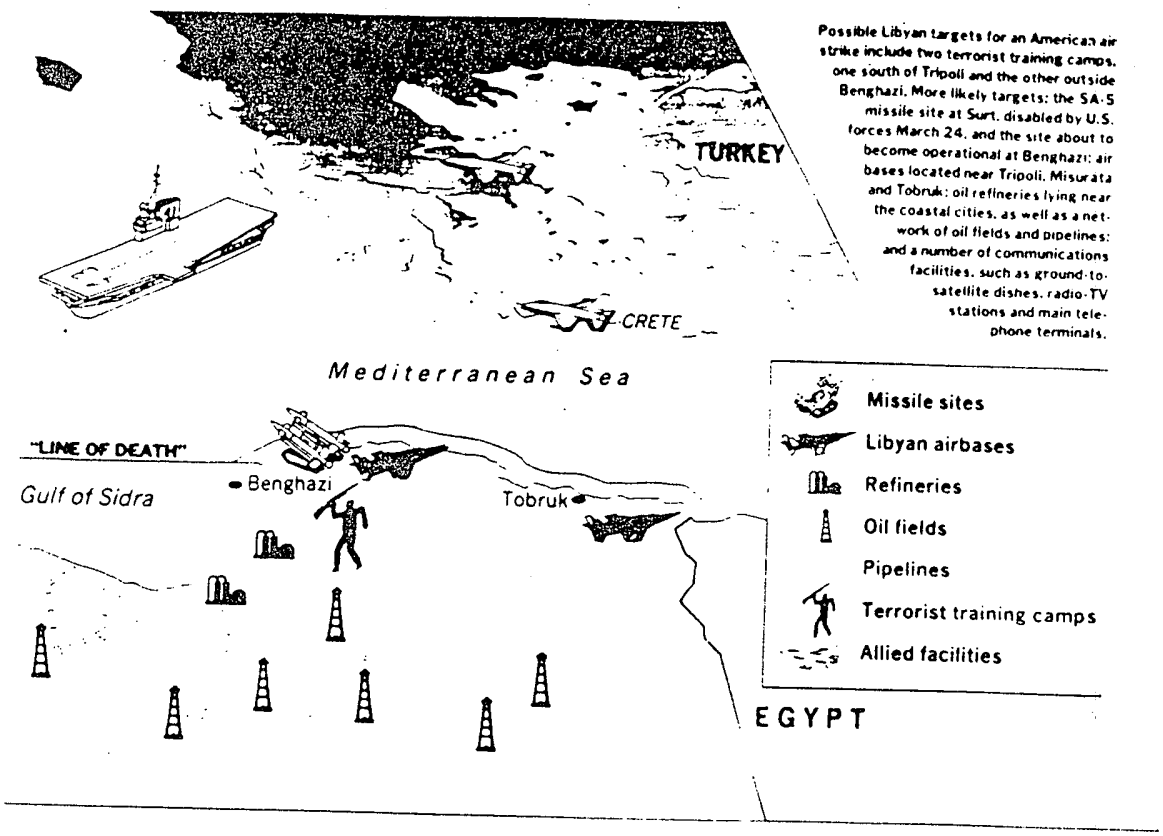
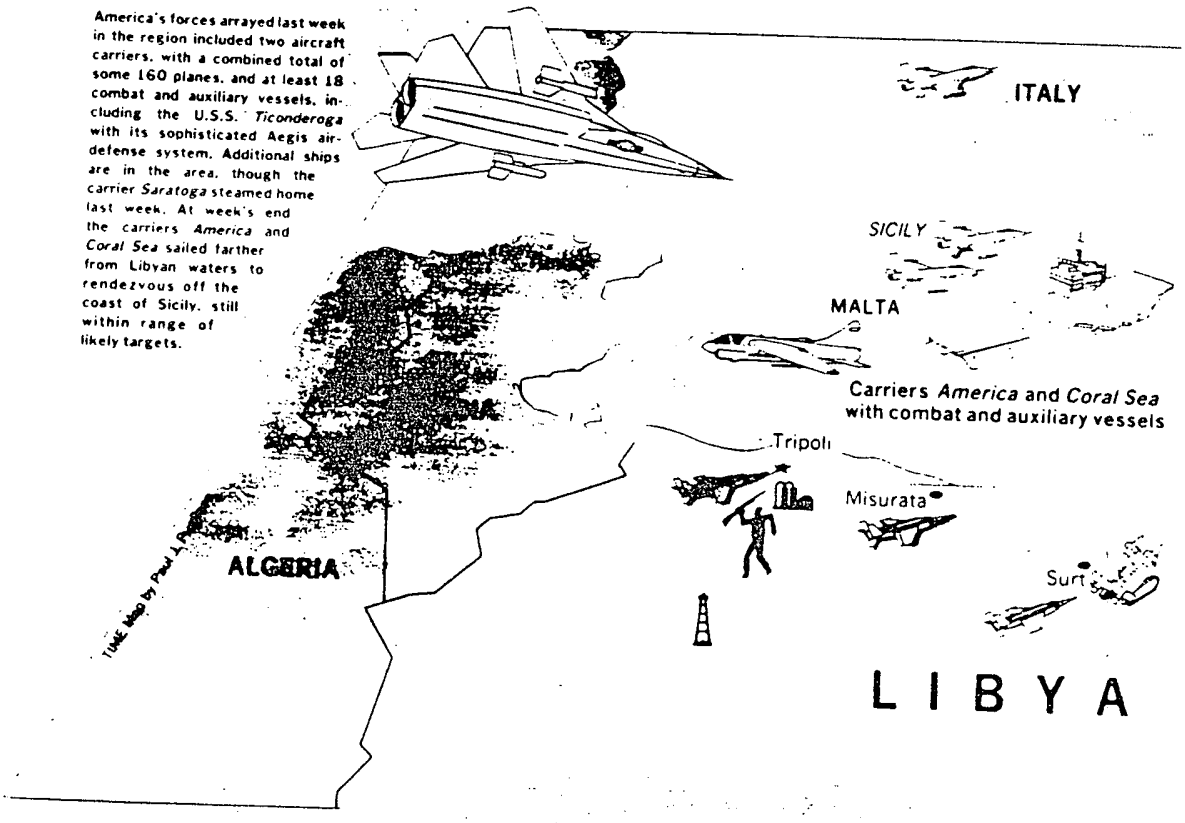


Possible Libyan targets for an American air strike include two terrorist training camps, one south of Tripoli and the other outside Benghazi. More likely targets: the SA-5 missile site at Surt, disabled by U.S. forces March 24, and the site about to become operational at Benghazi; air bases located near Tripoli, Misurata and Tobruk; oil refineries lying near the coastal cities, as well as a network of oil fields and pipelines; and a number of communications facilities, such as ground-to-satellite dishes, radio-TV stations and main telephone terminals.



America's forces arrayed last week in the region included two aircraft carriers, with a combined total of some 160 planes, and at least 18 combat and auxiliary vessels, including the U.S.S. *Ticonderoga* with its sophisticated Aegis air-defense system. Additional ships are in the area, though the carrier *Saratoga* steamed home last week. At week's end the carriers *America* and *Coral Sea* sailed farther from Libyan waters to rendezvous off the coast of Sicily, still within range of likely targets.

Carriers *America* and *Coral Sea* with combat and auxiliary vessels

TIME Map by Paul J. Pugliese

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